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ABSTRACT

Public policies intended to help those who are disadvantaged by the traditional sexual division of family and work responsibilities often tend to perpetuate the very system responsible for many inequalities. One example of such policies is the present income tax structure. Because goods and services produced in the household are not taxed, one-earner couples are at a considerable advantage over couples who must buy these goods and services with after-tax earnings. Two married people with relatively equal earnings pay substantially more in taxes than they would if they were single, and two people with only one income pay substantially less than the single wage-earner. These and other policies that penalize two-earner families are unlikely to change soon; however, no new programs with similar effects should be added. Though women would clearly benefit from employment legislation that would make it easier to combine family and job responsibilities, there would be serious consequences for women's employment if only women were eligible for legislated benefits, because employers would then have an additional reason for hiring men in preference to women. Parental leave for the birth and care of children, for example, should be adopted for men as well as women. Opponents of such leaves invariably point to the toll on businesses, offering high estimates of costs and insupportable projections of other effects. Pressure to change public policy could mount if more people were aware of the advantages that one-earner couples enjoy and of the contributions of employed wives and mothers to the nation's economy. (Contains 13 references.) (AC)

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FAMILY POLICIES AND GENDER EQUALITY[1]

Marianne A. Ferber

The traditional family is today glorified by conservative politicians as the moral backbone of the country and touted by mainstream economists as maximizing material well-being. This family consists of a male wage earner, a female homemaker, and several children. Other families, whether dual-earner, single parent, or same sex couples are at best tolerated, at worst condemned as immoral. Feminists, women and men, tend to see things quite differently. They favor egalitarian families, where responsibilities are shared by partners according to preferences and abilities (do I dare say "to each according to need, from each according to ability"), and mindful of the high price of specialization and dependency.

Although the traditional family at its best offered a haven for children and wives dependent on support from the "pater familias," and for men who needed a warm retreat from the dog-eat-dog world, it was by no means always at its best. Beyond that, while specialization of the man as breadwinner and the woman as homemaker was functional when life was short, fertility high, and production in the home of essential goods and services time consuming, this has not been true in advanced industrialized countries for a long time.

Now families are small, most goods and many services can be purchased, and homemaking is nothing like a full-time job during

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[1]This paper draws freely on Ferber et al., 1991.

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the many years when there are no young children in the household. At the same time, the cost of providing what are today regarded as necessities for a family, let alone maintaining it in the style to which Americans would like to become accustomed, has increased very substantially.

It is therefore not surprising that increasingly more women, voluntarily or of necessity, are sharing in financial support of the family.[2] Meantime, most men are giving up the role of sole wage earners without taking on an equal share of homemaking responsibilities, and a growing minority is abandoning both responsibilities entirely. This situation is universally decried.

Conservatives seek salvation in attempting to move back to the "good old days," ignoring the obvious reality that they can not be artificially recreated under present day conditions. Equally important is that the "good old days" never were that good. For one, the risks of specialization always were serious if the marriage did not work out, the wage earner lost his job, or if one partner became disabled or died prematurely. The problems were particularly serious for the homemaker; in case of need, the husband could hire a housekeeper, but not vice versa. Hence a better solution is needed, but there is a serious dilemma involved in finding one. Policies intended to help those who are

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[2]The alternative solution of paying women who are full-time homemakers is clearly not an appropriate solution under these conditions, even on the most unrealistic assumption that it might be politically feasible.

disadvantaged by the persistence of important elements of the traditional division of responsibilities often tend to perpetuate the very system responsible for many of their difficulties.

Examples of such policies abound. For instance, protective legislation for women workers, generally introduced with the best of intentions, and no doubt at times helpful to hard working women, have also kept them from achieving a greater degree of equality in the labor force. Such laws have new been largely abolished.[1]

More important today is the present income tax structure. Because the value of goods and services produced in the household is not taxed, one earner couples are at a considerable advantage as compared to those who buy many of these goods and services with after tax earnings. Further, even after the 1986 reforms, two people with relatively equal earnings pay substantially more taxes than if they were single, while two people with only one income pay substantially less than the single wage earner would. Similarly, under existing Social Security arrangements, substantial benefits are provided for nonemployed spouses of covered workers, and some extra benefits for spouses not entitled to equally large benefits in their own right, while these workers pay no additional taxes as compared to those who have no dependents.

These policies are helpful to traditional families (albeit

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[1]Not permitting women in the armed forces to participate in combat is one remnant of this approach that still persists.

not those too poor to pay taxes, nor those not covered by Social Security), and reduce the need for homemakers to seek employment against their own and/or their husbands' wishes. At the same time, such policies not only offend the principles of horizontal equity, which requires that equals should be treated equally, but they penalize two-earner couples, and legitimize and perpetuate traditional gender roles. They are, however, strongly entrenched and it is most unlikely that anything will be done to change them in the foreseeable future. Therefore, it is all the more important not to add new programs that would tend to have similar effects.

A number of policies now being considered by employers and governments in response to widespread demand by employees need to be evaluated in that light. Clearly, at this time, women would benefit most from any changes in terms of employment that would make it easier for workers to combine responsibilities to job and family, from flextime and subsidized care for dependents to family leave; but the attendant drawbacks would also be most serious for women if only they were eligible for them, or if they were the only ones to avail themselves of these benefits, for employers would then have an additional reason for hiring men in preference to women.

The best single example of the issues involved is leave for the birth and care of children. Such a policy was adopted as early as 1878 in Germany, and national legislation now exists in all 118 countries, other than the U.S., that were included in a

1985 survey by the International Labour Organization (Bookman, 1991).[4] The length of the leave, generally with compensation, ranging up to 100 percent of earnings (from the employer or, more often, out of public funds) varies from 12 weeks in Greece and the Netherlands, to 11 months in Finland.

The need for action has finally been recognized in recent years this country. A bill mandating a 12 week family leave for men or women, without pay, but with continued health benefits, was vetoed by President Bush in 1990, and again in September 1992.[5] Passage of this bill would have constituted a considerable improvement. As of now, there are exceedingly few provisions for leaves except for childbirth, and those provisions are almost invariably for women only.[6]

Because only women become pregnant and give birth, it is

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[4]The federal Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978, as currently interpreted, does require employers of 15 or more workers who have sick leave or disability programs to make the same provisions for physical disabilities related to pregnancy and childbirth. Beyond that, as of 1990, 12 states required employers to offer pregnancy and childbirth leave, even if they do not do so for other disabilities.

[5]President Bush then suggested tax incentives for businesses that would provide leaves voluntarily. Apart from the loss of tax funds, very disturbing to people concerned with the federal deficit, his bill does not guarantee that businesses will go along, nor does it require that workers must be assured of being able to return to their job.

[6]In 1989, about 40 percent of women in larger firms, who employ somewhat more than one-half of women in the labor force, had some maternity leave, albeit only 3 percent with pay. Employees in small firms, for which no detailed data are available, are far less likely to have such benefits. Those who do not, must piece together some combination of sick leave and vacations, unless they want to quit their job.

often assumed that they are the only ones who need leave for these purposes. In recent years, however, much has been learned about parent-child bonding during the period immediately after birth. Hence there is a strong case to be made that if "fathering" is to mean anything much beyond providing the sperm that fertilizes the egg, a brief paternity leave for child birth[7] is crucial.[8]

There is ample evidence that, as of now, women tend to be more emotionally involved with children than men. Fuchs (1988) in a book that has received a great deal of attention has ascribed women's inferior position in the labor market to their greater devotion to children. Studies in developing countries have shown that income controlled by mothers is allocated so as to confer greater benefits on children, and considerably reduces their mortality (Thomas, 1989). Assuming that this difference in devotion to children is simply a given is rather unrealistic. To the extent that bonding after birth plays an important part,[9] the father's presence during that time should make a real difference. Similarly, we have been hearing much of the disadvantages of out-of-home care for infants up to 6 months to one year of age. But if "mothering" is no longer to mean that the woman has total responsibility for the care of the children, inevitably at the expense of her labor force commitment, it is

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[7]Obviously there is an equally strong case for both parents obtaining leave for adoption.

[8]The generally strong attachment of mothers to adopted children supports this hypothesis.

necessary to have parental, rather than maternal leave for a more extended period of time. Although provision of leaves for fathers lags far behind the availability of such arrangements for mothers even in Europe, by 1988 Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Portugal and Sweden had some form of paternity leave. No one who favors greater gender equality should advocate anything less in this country.

It is frequently argued that men would not take such leaves even if they were available. The example of Sweden, the country which was first to introduce leaves for fathers, suggests that this is a hurdle, but one that can be overcome in time. By the late 1980's, fully 85 percent of fathers took an average of 8.5 days of the 10 day leave at childbirth, and about 25 percent took more than an additional month during the first year. Thus the great advantage of such policies is that they not only fill an urgent need, but tend to break down gender stereotypes.

Even more effective than a policy of permitting either parent to take the leave, would be a provision that each parent may take only half of the specified time, whether or not the other parent takes any. Norway has such a provision for leave that may be taken to care for sick children. Single parents - generally mothers - could be permitted to take the whole leave.[1] Because employers would find it difficult to predict who would become a single parent, concern about discrimination would not be

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[1]Same sex couples could, obviously, be subject to the same rules as heterosexual couples.

as serious.

One might assume that an administration that makes so much of its belief in "family values" would find it difficult to oppose some type of leave for childbirth and child care during an election year. But, as noted earlier, their devotion appears to be mainly to traditional families, which might be endangered by such policies. Beyond that, opponents of mandating leaves invariably point to the costs businesses would incur, and tend to accept estimates that are very high because they assume that the absent employees are replaced by highly paid substitutes who need to be trained for the job. In fact, it has been found that in large firms colleagues tend to take over for managers, while production workers are generally replaced by others working overtime (General Accounting Office, 1987; Trzcinski, 1989). Small firms apparently do experience difficulties (Butler and Wasserman, 1988), but have been generally exempted in the proposed bills, including the present one. At the same time these opponents generally ignore the very substantial costs to employees and their families of not having such leaves, although estimates of these costs are available (Spalter-Roth and Hartmann, 1990).

The question also arises how serious it would be if costs to employers were to go up. Businesses unwilling to provide additional benefits to their employees generally argue that they would not be able to compete. This ignores the fact that they might well be able to shift costs backward to workers by failing

to give them raises and other benefits they would have offered, or to shift them forward to customers by raising prices. This is particularly true because their domestic competitors, who would also find their expenses increasing, would be likely to do the same. As far as foreign competitors are concerned, the irony is that many of them are already required to provide more generous benefits than are being considered here.[10]

Pressure could mount if more people became aware of the advantages one-earner couples enjoy over other types of households, and that this often benefits relatively high income families most. Also, it would help if they were aware of the contributions employed wives make to keeping the budget deficit from being even larger, by adding to tax revenues generally, and to the Social Security fund in particular. This is in addition to the savings when women with labor force experience are able to support themselves and their children when the need arises.

These arguments should appeal to many who are not interested in furthering egalitarian relationships for their own sake, or humanitarian enough to care about the well-being of women and children per se. Feminists concerned with these issues need to see to it that this information is more widely disseminated.

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[10]Another irony is that these same businesses appear to be unconcerned about competitiveness when they continue to pay vastly higher salaries to executives than do businesses in other countries.

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